

Refugee Teen Suicides Prompt ORR Mental Health Study

Prompted by reports of suicides and attempted suicides by refugee teenagers living in the Hmong community in Fresno, California, ORR Director Dr. Nguyen Van Hanh has asked refugee resettlement agencies to be alert to possible mental health needs among their clients.

In a recent letter to state refugee coordinators, Dr. Van Hanh said that the unique problems can sometimes accompany the psychosocial adjustment process for refugee newcomers in specific refugee communities, just as with non-refugee populations. He urged that vulnerable or at-risk refugees be identified and referred to appropriate services.

Following the suicides by eight Hmong teenagers over the last four years, Dr. Van Hanh commissioned a limited assessment of the current status and needs in the Fresno community by the Refugee Mental Health Program (RMHP), one of the agency's technical assistance providers. The study identified some "precipitating factors" in five of the eight suicides, but noted that the cases did not meet the "typical" teen suicide risks profile. Acknowledging that "suicide cluster" itself is an environmental risk factor, the study said intergenerational and family conflicts and other areas would benefit from greater attention and scrutiny.

Assisting in the RMHP assessment were staff members from the Substance Abuse and Health Services Administration's Youth Violence and Suicide Prevention program and a Hmong mental health professional from California State University in Sacramento.

Among the recommendations to help reduce suicide risk factors and enhance protective factors were special programs for out-of-school youth, including issues related to truancy and dropout rates, gang prevention and intervention on behalf of vulnerable youth; development of mentor and role-model programs for Hmong girls; training/awareness programs for school staff, students, and families that address issues related to lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender youth; and improved services addressing such basic economic needs as safe housing, employment, vocational training and skills development.

Dr. Van Hanh urged refugee leaders to access the free RMHP technical assistance services. More information is available at: www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr
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